To Be an Actress: Labor and Performance in Anna May Wong's Cross-Media World by Yiman Wang (review)

Clutario offers insightful and creative analyses of various archival texts; however, for a book that focuses much of its content on sartorial presentation, there are not enough images conveying the sartorial practices that she notes throughout the book. The book would have only been strengthened with the inclusion of these images allowing the reader to fully grasp the importance of these garments in shaping the national discourse.

Beauty Regimes unearths the complex ways beauty battles with and against colonial power structures and the various ways that colonial subjects resist and (re)create national identities. The book will be of interest to scholars of feminism, fashion, colonialism, empire, and nation-building. Methodologically, Clutario demonstrates creative ways to read archival material and provides a new lens in which to examine the complicated relationships between Filipinos and Americans. In taking the role of beauty seriously, the author demonstrates how colonial projects affect even seemingly innocuous everyday practices of dressing oneself and consumption of popular media and are equally as important to analyze as political texts in understanding how nations are formed.

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Anna May Wong debuted as an extra in the 1919 silent film The Red Lantern and later attracted notice as "The Mongol Slave" in Douglas Fairbanks' The Thief of Baghdad (1924). Unsurprisingly, racial discrimination shaped both the stereotypi- cal parts she was cast in and the more substantive roles she was denied. Thus, Wong has come to epitomize the historical lack of Asian American

representa- tion in film, television, and theater. Yiman Wang's To Be an Actress does not soft-pedal the racism and sexism of the entertainment industries and artistic circles in which Wong moved. Wang provides many reminders of how Wong's appearance was fetishized in film and photography, and how she was denied roles in favor of yellowface leads (most famously in MGM's 1937 blockbuster The Good Earth). At the same time, her book resists portraying Wong simply as a victim of typecasting. Instead, Wang presents her as a performer-worker who continually tried to expand her craft and enhance her professional image reanimating aspects of her career through what Wang calls "anachronotopes:" "disjointed, recursive, and nonhierarcical time-spaces that throw teleological progressionism into disarray and instead invest in what is rendered passé and marginal" (7). Wang's move away from conventional chronology allows for new and sometimes surprising insights about Wong to emerge.

Despite her early start, Anna May Wong's career remained precarious. Wong told a 1925 interviewer "It is hard to get into the pictures, but it is harder to keep in them. Of course, it is nice enough if one gets a five-year contract as some of the actors do, but freelancing which I do is not easy. You see, there are not many Chinese parts" (104). Her 40-year career was marked by extended absences from Hollywood to pursue more fulfilling opportunities abroad or by periods of involuntary retirement. Wang stresses how Wong worked non-stop to enhance her own employability, seeking new skills to reinvent her image or expand her range of roles. Criticized for her accent when she appears in London's West End in a 1929 production of The Circle of Chalk (starring opposite a young Lawrence Olivier), she sought voice lessons. She recorded dialogue in French, English, and German for her first talkie, a British film The Flame of Love (1930). Through tutoring as well as a 1936 trip to China, she gained cultural expertise about traditional Chinese music, fashion, and opera that allowed her to enhance her cosmopolitan image.

The book's excellent analyses (with links to digitized videos) reframe cinematic moments so often seen as Wong's capitulation to orientalist stereotype and melodramatic excess. For instance, Wong famously complained about her obligatory death scenes, observing sarcastically that her epitaph should read "a woman who has died a thousand deaths" (51). Wang shows how Wong's gestures, facial expressions, and tears (Wong was known as an "exquisite crier without glycerin" [51]) reveal her skillful insertion of melodramatic excess and hyperbole. She also used interactions with fans as well as her films to send what Wang calls "greetings to the world," subtle messages asserting her unique brand of cultural authority. Wong signed her photographs with Chinese characters alongside her signature in English, sometimes accompanied by the tongue-in-cheek greeting "Orientally yours." She also used her language skills to complicate her roles. In one scene from Daughter of Shanghai (1937), Wong's character speaks in Taishanese dialect to prove her Chinese identity, a ruse supported by another character played by Korean American actor Philip Ahn. Wang highlights

the pretense of this "strategic" "Oriental" (dis)play" as Ahn interprets her line to an oblivious white character: "Wong and Ahn ostensibly share the Chinese language, which lumps them together as Chinese and therefore as foreign" (45). Of course, Taishanese is not Mandarin, and neither language sounds remotely like Korean. To those in the know (including Wong and Ahn as actors), this moment of linguistic display by Wong's character and subsequent "translation" by Ahn's character becomes an "inside joke, a challenge to "white America's patronizing assimilationism" that "under-scores complex Asian American identities, suggesting that the subaltern affective feeling is based not on a shared foreign language (or homogeneity), but rather on their shared (dis)play of an illusory foreign code served up for the normative audience" (45). Wang's reading thus underscores the literal presence of Asian Americans (certainly as actors and possibly as spectators) in the cinematic moment, which challenges the primacy and omniscience of the white gaze.

Wang's impressive archival research covers not only Wong's film career but also her work in television, documentary, fashion, and theater, such as a Broadway appearance in On the Spot (1930). Wang also draws attention to Wong's supporting characters in film and televisions and her skills in comedy, including a memorable pie-throwing spoof of Shakespeare's Taming of the Shrew (directed by no less than Alfred Hitchcock for the British revue film Elstree Calling [1930]). The book juxtaposes these forgotten appearances with Wong's more famous roles, such as in Shanghai Express (1932), to show how Wong's career deserves scrutiny for its variety and multiplicity as much as for its complicity with typecasting.

Lovingly detailed and rigorously analytical, To Be an Actress models how to examine anew a subject whose image and efforts have been so often commodified and exploited. With the recent wave of recognition for Asian and Asian American actors, including multiple Oscars for the 2022 film Everything Everywhere All at Once, it is tempting to conclude that a long history of misrepresentation and marginalization is finally being corrected. Wisely, Wang's study resists framing the high points of Anna May Wong's career as a set of "firsts" on a timeline of racial progress. As the book's conclusion reminds us, Wong's career is better examined as "recursive episodes" in "a meandering, endless labyrinth with multiple entries, throughways, cul-de-sacs, departures, returns, and nooks for agonizing, waiting, resting, laughing, and rebeginning" (202). Given how much Anna May Wong continues to attract curiosity, it is a real pleasure to read the care with which Wang reanimates her labors and imagines her as greeting us in the present.

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